ROMANCE

Romances satisfy our deepest imaginative desires. If we most fear loss of identity in separation from what we hold dearest and from what makes us what we are, romances allay that fear. As they imagine narratives of separation, errancy, and loss, they therapeutically deliver endings of reintegration, recovery, and return. That which was lost is found.

The word *romans* was originally a simple linguistic designation, meaning "French," since French was derived from Latin, the language of Rome. In the twelfth century, however, the word narrowed in meaning, coming to designate narrative (forms of *roman* still mean "novel" in French, Italian, and German). The word then became particularly associated with a genre of narrative. It came to designate stories of separation and return, disintegration and reintegration.

Certainly classical Greek literature has examples of "romance" narrative, stories that involve separation, testing, and travel, all the prelude to, and premise of, a final homecoming and recognition. Homer's *Odyssey* is fundamentally a romance; five later Greek narratives of this kind also survive (first through fourth centuries C.E.). The broader modal commitment of romance to "comedy" (a story with a happy ending) also has classical roots. Romances are "comic" stories not because they make us laugh but, rather, like Shakespeare's comedies, they make us feel good through happy endings.

The dynamic French-speaking court cultures of twelfth-century France and England gave the genre its most powerful, undying impetus. Chrétien de Troyes (fl. 1160–90) is its greatest exponent in his Arthurian romances, but the rich set of Tristan materials and the lays of Marie de France are also of exceptional importance. The genre, once deeply planted in the twelfth century in French, flourishes anew in all European vernacular languages and in each historical period of European and American culture. It remains energetically immune to the literary plant killers of moralistic objection, high literary disdain for escapist entertainment, and satire.

The fundamental characteristic of romances is structural, not stylistic. They can be short or long, oral or literary, but to be romances they must have, or adapt, a particular story structure. Romances classically have a tripartite structure: integration (or implied integration); disintegration; and reintegration. They begin in, or at least imply, a protected, civilized state of some integrated social unit (e.g., family). That state is disrupted, expelling a member of the unit (the hero or heroine of the story, who is usually young) into a wild place. Undergoing the tests of that wild place is the premise of return to the integrated, civilized state of familial and/or social unity. Successfully undergoing tests in the wild often results in marriage,

The Dance of Mirth. *The Romance of the Rose*, ca. 1500. The scene illustrates a moment in the thirteenth-century French poem. Note the splendor and circularity of this aristocratic performance of amorous ritual.

in which case return to home and family is also return to an enlarged home and family.

This story pattern is characteristic of many fairy stories, medieval romances, Shakespearean comedies, novels, and popular movies. It not only represents desire but activates desire in its readers: the pleasure we take in such stories derives from our desire for the reintegration of lives in a coherent and constructive narrative. The desired pattern can also, of course, be adapted in many variations. In particular, it can be activated in order to be frustrated: some protagonists, particularly adulterous ones like Tristan and Ysolt, never reach home, forever needing to defer that unreachable happy ending of recognition.

Romances, then, are symbolic stories, replaying and allaying the fears of the young as they face the apparently insuperable challenges of the adult world. Their deepest wisdom is this: civilization is not a unitary concept. To enter and remain in the world of civilized order, we must, say romances, have commerce with all that threatens it. To regain Rome at the center, we must first be tested in the marginal wilds of romance. To be recognized and found, we must first be lost.

The romances offered here exemplify different possibilities derived from this story structure. *Sir Orfeo* is the only classic example, true in almost every respect to the model sketched above. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*, following this cluster, play fascinating games with classic romance structure. *Milun* and *Lanval* suggest different possibilities for romance within the tight and suffocating context of the medieval court. *Chevrefoil* expresses the way the aspiration to achieve a happy ending is all the more painfully intense because impossible. The earlier sample from Thomas's *Tristran* (pp. 140–43) underlines the inevitable end of such an impossible passion.

MARIE DE FRANCE

Much of twelfth-century French literature was composed in England in the Anglo-Norman dialect (see p. 11). Prominent among the earliest poets writing in the French vernacular, who shaped the genres, themes, and styles of later medieval European poetry, is the author who, in an epilogue to her *Fables*, calls herself Marie de France. That signature tells us only that her given name was Marie and that she was born in France, but circumstantial evidence from her writings shows that she spent much of her life in England. A reference to her in a French poem written in England around 1180 speaks of "dame Marie" who wrote "lais" much loved and praised, read, and heard by counts, barons, and knights and indicates that her poems also appealed to ladies who listened to them gladly and joyfully.

Three works can be safely attributed to Marie, probably written in the following order: the *Lais* [English "lay" refers to a short narrative poem in verse], the *Fables*, and *St. Patrick's Purgatory*. Marie's twelve lays are short romances (they range from 118 to 1,184 lines), each of which deals with a single event or crisis in the affairs of noble lovers. In her prologue, Marie tells us that she had heard these *performed*, and in several of the lays she refers to the Breton language and Breton storytellers—that is, professional minstrels from the French province of Brittany or the Celtic parts of Great Britain. Marie's lays provide the basis of the genre that came to be known as the "Breton lay." In the prologue Marie dedicates the work to a "noble king," who is most likely to have been Henry II of England, who reigned from 1154 to 1189.